

THE CUILLIN RIDGE

Tips for success by Mike Lates



Blaven View of Ridge

The Cuillin Ridge Traverse - Britain's finest mountaineering challenge

Twenty-two peaks lie in a continuous chain stretching over twelve kilometres. They create the Cuillin Ridge Traverse—one of the finest and longest Alpine-style rock-climbing routes in Europe with over 4000 metres (13,000 feet) of ascent and descent. The Cuillin Ridge Traverse is arguably the finest climb in Britain.

Mike Lates has been a mountain guide on Skye since 1995 and has completed more than fifty Traverses including a Greater Traverse and two in full winter conditions. He sheds light on many of the most frequently made mistakes and suggests dozens of practical solutions.

Maps and route descriptions are not included as a large number of these are available from well-stocked climbing shops and, increasingly, on the internet.

The most highly recommended are Skye The Cuillin by Harvey's Maps and an appendix at the end of the superb book The Cuillin by Gordon Stainforth.

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INTRODUCTION

Many myths abound on how to succeed on "the Greatest Mountaineering Challenge in Britain."

These are based on the experiences of individuals with wildly different fitness levels, climbing skills, familiarity with the Cuillin and luck with the weather conditions.

This document is an attempt to give a broader insight for aspirants of different abilities.

My first attempt was a failed winter Traverse at Easter in 1987. As a team of 4 we had hardly lost sight of the Sligachan Hotel before having to admit defeat after two hard days and one very unpleasant night.

When I first moved to Skye I adopted the lightweight approach (see appendix c.) with reasonable success, being on the spot whenever the weather turned good. For a period I prophesied that "if you can do it 2 days with a bivy pack you can definitely do it in a single day."

Rapid reappraisal of this advice became necessary when friends and clients arrived with restricted time available. Weather watching developed into an obsessive habit in order to identify the optimal time to start, snatching success between bouts of westerly gales. It became obvious that an overnight bivy was necessary more often than not. The starting point, where to aim for overnight shelter and which route options to take were all affected by the timing of the magical weather window.

An early lesson for me was the difference between failure and success. One party were suffering badly by the time they

reached Bruach na Frithe and we opted to bail out from there. The following week I persuaded another party, similarly wet and dejected to dig just a wee bit deeper. We skirted Am Bastier and the Tooth and were on top of Gillean in less than an hour. The celebrations were not in the least bit tempered by the bypass, so small was the significance compared to the achievement of completing a Cuillin Ridge Traverse.

WHAT IS THE CHALLENGE?

The challenge is simply to traverse the Cuillin Ridge in a continuous style. The reward is an intensely satisfying blend of hard physical and mental work mixed with some of the best scenery in the world.

The Cuillin is a cirque formed by a huge extinct volcano that erupted about 70 million years ago. Subsequent weathering and erosion has left the Cuillin Bowl split, down almost to sea level, by Glen Sligachan that runs essentially north to south.

The Main Ridge lies on the western side of Glen Sligachan and forms the "Great Traverse" which is the classic route.

The "Greater Traverse" continues by crossing Glen Sligachan at sea-level then re-ascends the eastern Black Cuillin to finish over Clach Glas and Blaven. Being about twice as long the Greater challenge is not often undertaken.

The Ridge Traverse most closely resembles a huge Alpine rock route. Great demands are made on route finding, fitness, climbing ability, rope-work and teamwork. Ease of escape makes the level of commitment for such a huge route comparatively small. It is only this factor that undermines the Ridge's potential status as one of the biggest classic mountaineering routes in



Europe. Weather conditions are frequently as harsh as they are on mountains with far higher elevation. Skye is at the latitude of 57 degrees north!

Sadly the ease of escape also makes the Ridge one of the most frequently “failed-on” routes in the world. The commitment to succeed must be strong for all members of the team throughout an attempt. As with all great climbs it gives a heightened sense of achievement denying oneself the easy way out, especially on such a long route.

WHAT GRADE IS IT?

A British rock-climbing grade is simply not applicable to the Traverse. It is an Alpine route in terms of the terrain; exposure and techniques needed and should be graded accordingly. The following summary should give an experienced alpinist a good idea of what is involved:

- Approach. 7km 900m of ascent. Rough walking,
- Traverse. 12km. 3000m ascent and 3000m descent! Scrambling over exposed terrain grade I, II and III. Three pitches of rock climbing at grade IV, all



avoidable. Three abseils normal in good conditions.

- Descent. 6km, 900m of descent. Scrambling (300m) then rough walking.

For those with little experience of Alpine climbing grades it is possible to think of the lower grades as largely equating to scrambling grades used in the UK up to grade III (grade 3 or Moderate). In the Cuillin, as with the Alps, there are many sections that include down-climbing at the same grades.

To most Brits there is then a notable leap in standard at Grade IV. It can require significant rock climbing skill with confidence at the British climbing standard of Very Difficult. On the continent these pitches tend to be either bolted or pegged to such a degree that even those with little climbing skill can force their way up. No such luxuries exist on the three main climbs on a Ridge traverse and all protection must be placed by the leader.

The TD gap and Naismith’s Route are, arguably, both grade V. Confidence leading routes of the British Severe standard is recommended for climbs of this standard.



HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE?

Although the record for the Traverse is less than 3.5 hours it is worth remembering that this is the same as the record for ascending and descending the Matterhorn from Cervina! (Also circa 3000m.)

The following times are based on clear dry weather conditions for a well-balanced team of 2 with suitable fitness and climbing experience.

- Approach. 2-4 hours depending on starting point.
- Traverse. 9-16 hours.
- Descent. 2-3 hours to sea level.

One Bivouac is normal

A word of caution

If an Alpine route has a guidebook time of 12-20 hours with one bivouac normal I treat it with the utmost respect. If it involves 4000 metres of ascent and 4000 metres of descent I start training hard. If of the route is along exposed ridges I know my head is going to be fried by the end. Nobody that I know has ever completed a Ridge Traverse and thought it was ‘easy’.

PREPARATION

Prior planning prevents poor performance. Everything from getting the right partner, practising together down to how many karabiners to carry should be thought about. It’s a good excuse to get together with your climbing partner for a few beers at home or, even better, a day out in the hills together.

Find a climbing partner of compatible fitness, ability and drive that you fully trust your life with.

Have a practice day on a scramble in Snowdonia, the Lake District or Scotland. Descend the same route for a more realistic assessment of your abilities. Carrying a large pack adds even more reality to the exercise.

Practice moving together on a short rope. You will definitely benefit from it in the Cuillin and on forays to the Alps.

Studying photographs and compiling a time-schedule will prove very useful when the time comes (see appendix e.)



THE EXPEDITION TO SKYE

Weather watching will be the main pre-occupation of a well-prepared team. Ideal conditions are most common when the wind is coming from an easterly direction (from northerly round to south-easterly.) If strong wet westerlies are forecast consider staying on the Mainland until a change appears.

The best idea for many teams is to research crucial sections of the Ridge. Most of these are classic routes in their own right. Again use the chance to practice moving together on a short rope.

Stashing food, water and bivvy gear is a good idea only if you can guarantee reaching the stash and relocating your equipment. If it is fine enough weather to consider stashing equipment it's usually fine enough to be starting the attempt. Many teams often waste a good window of weather by stashing gear only for the weather to close in for the rest of their trip. Litter from teams that have failed to find or reach their stash is commonplace. Please label them with dates for which they are to be used and make every attempt to remove them yourself.

If the attempt is immanent keep crucial kit dry, rest and carbo-load then set off as soon as the weather improves.

There are some wonderful coastal crags on Skye if the mountains are holding bad

weather. However, always keep a close eye on the weather as it changes very rapidly and you don't want find yourself looking at the cloud-free Cuillin from 50 miles away!

ON ROUTE

Day 1

Conserve energy on the uphill approach unless the weather window is very tight. This is the longest continuous ascent with your packs at their largest. Eat and drink regularly. Carry no water until the last river is crossed.

Keep moving at a steady pace. Take on food and water when rope work slows the pace naturally. Check progress against your schedule regularly. If you are behind by a significant percentage adjust your route to avoid the rock climbs (see appendix b.)

There will always be a weaker team member. Help out climbing partners who are struggling. Even just transferring a bottle of water can make a big difference to someone's balance. Conversely- accept help if you are slowing down the attempt. Moving roped together can remove a lot of stress in weaker members of the team if done properly.

If lost, the best advice is to climb up to the crest above- the chosen line for most people traversing in good weather. Descending the crest can be enough to bring you back below the cloud level or generally to easier terrain. This can be

tenuous to follow but crampon scratches are increasingly common.

If you have the bivvy gear consider taking a proper break with a brew after 5 or 6 hours. It does marvels for morale and can help everyone to do a couple more crucial hours.

Bivouac north of Banachdich if at all possible. An Dorus is, time-wise, halfway. An ideal bivvy is open to the stars and Northern lights etc but there is a huge benefit to be gained by finding some overhanging shelter if rain is likely. Keep eyes peeled toward the end of day one. Many folk carry a light tarpaulin

Water is not as difficult to find, as myths would have you believe. Carrying too much water is as common a cause for failure because the rucsac weighs too much.

Carrying a cup makes collecting from small run-offs possible in many places. Lets face it it's not often that it hasn't rained in Skye in the previous 24 hours!

Most commonly I descend (with caution) with all the bottles in an empty rucsac as far as necessary. It is rarely more than a 40-minute exercise if a bit of intelligence is used. Ideally you make this collection from directly below your bivvy site taking enough to cook, brew tea and still leave 2 litres each for the following day. (Carry flattened empty containers for this purpose!)

Eat and drink as much as possible overnight. Don't worry about having to get up for a pee- this is time to replace calories and rehydrate.

Day 2

If day one was too slow and you are behind your schedule consider stashing the bivvy gear for collection over the next few days. Make a good note of its location and make sure it can't blow away.

Often I get up and go after one brew

in the morning. Breakfast is far easier to digest after about an hour of the route has warmed you up. It is worth waiting for the rock to dry on some occasions however. I'm sure that overnight dew is greasier than normal rain!

On first attempt make your priority to get to Gillean! Appendix b. has a large number of timesavers that can make the difference between success and failure.

Dream about a big session in the hotel on the way down but be aware that you will probably be asleep after the first pint!

CONCLUSION

Success! Congratulations. What do you fancy on your next trip?

Failed? Most of us fail at first attempt. I spent a torrid night in an orange sac and down bag on a tiny snow ledge and took 3 hours to climb 100 metres in a blizzard the next morning. The hot sun came out as we descended and stayed for the next 3 days.

What went wrong? What went well? The Ridge won't fall down; learn from your experiences and come back better prepared.

Currently I estimate that less than 10% of parties setting off to attempt the Ridge succeed. This document is my attempt to change attitudes, provide information, and improve that success rate.

Some of my ideas will be controversial, even taken as provocative, but they are borne out of fourteen years of concentrated experience and, undeniably, obsession.

In my humble opinion the Cuillin Ridge Traverse is a strong contender for the finest climb in the British Isles. I would like to see it given the respect that it deserves.



APPENDICES

- a Is the Ridge the finest climb in Britain?
- b The Route
- c The Style
- d What to carry
- e Time Schedule
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appendix a – is the ridge the finest climb in Britain?

Justification for such a grand accolade cannot be made purely with statistics but 3000 metre routes are very rare even in the Alps. The biggest attraction is undoubtedly the joy of so much continuous high quality climbing.

Most of the climbing is of the simplest, purest and most exhilarating form, following the crest of an obvious narrow ridge. There is a need for hands and total concentration but rarely a rope. In dry conditions the rock is of the very highest quality. As with all good routes the interest is continuous.

Technical difficulties requiring rope-work are limited to half a dozen key obstacles when weather conditions and climbing ability are suitable.

The recommended summer direction goes from south to north because a wonderful smooth rhythm can be achieved. Interestingly this doesn't seem to work in the opposite direction.

Route finding is one of the biggest joys of climbing with all the emotions of fear, trepidation and relief compounded into both micro and macro-navigation. The Great Traverse gives over 12 km of this wonderfully absorbing and intense stimulation.

The sheer length of the route and its challenges offers indulgence on a scale unrivalled in the British Isles. The lowly altitude just serves to disguise the fun that the Cuillin offer, leaving them wonderfully quiet for those who love their solitude.

At its best standing on top of the Cuillin is akin to perching on a crown that lies in a bed of jewels. The Isle of Skye is encircled by the clear Hebridean seas that reflect and enhance the already vivid colours of

the sky and landscape. The western horizon is dotted with islands each with its own mystical appeal. High peaks are spread as far as the eye can see back across on the Scottish mainland to the east. The quality of light is legendary and really has to be seen to be believed. It is possibly due to Skye being at the latitude of 56 degrees north. The Northern Lights (Aurora Borealis) can frequently be seen although not so easily in mid-summer when the sky never really gets dark. Traversing through the night during these halcyon periods is certainly not unheard of.

Climbing in such an awe-inspiring arena is a privilege not on offer in many other parts of the world.

One attraction is that a Cuillin Ridge Traverse is, technically, well within the grasp of many mountaineers who consider themselves as lower-grade climbers. Equally, aspirants are not as committed when traversing this 3000 metre climb, as they would be if ascending a vertical route. Similar routes in the Greater Ranges tend to be technically harder, far more committing and with difficult access.

The Cuillin Ridge Traverse is a truly a dream route but doesn't give itself up easily. Many a climber has spent years piecing the Traverse together before finally achieving their dream.

appendix b – the route

Starts

Approach Gars bheinn from Glen Brittle. 3 hours.

Go via Coire Ghrunnda to keep dry feet and fill up with a lot of water only 100m below the crest of the ridge. Involves going out and back but with no packs if done cleverly.

Approach from Loch Scavaig. 2 hours. Base yourselves near (or in) the JMCS hut on the shore or take a boat in from Elgol. Aesthetically this is the most satisfying start and is significantly shorter.

Many people choose to start at the first Munro, Sgurr nan Eag or even the TD Gap. I consider this a practical decision akin to taking a lift in the Alps rather than cheating. Conditions may lend themselves to a purer Traverse on the next attempt.

Others choose to start by the Dubhs Ridge or even via the Cioch.

For a north to south Traverse

Reach Bealach na Lice via Fionn Coire from the head of Glen Brittle in 2 hours. Fill up with water 100m below the Ridge. Start on Naismith's route, traverse to Gillean and then return to packs by turning Am Bastier on the Sligachan side.

A Breakdown of Sections

South end from Gars bheinn to Bealach a' Coire an Lochain. Easy scrambling. (2 hours)

"Coire Lagan" from the TD gap to the In. Pinn. Rock climbing, abseiling, route-finding and exposure. (3 hours)

Southern mid-section from In. Pinn. to Mhadaidh. Easy scrambling with exposed ridges. (3 hours)

Northern mid-section from Mhadaidh to Bruach na Frithe. Hard scrambling, navigation, abseiling and exposure. (4 hours)

North end from Bhashtier Tooth to Gillean. Rock climbing, route-finding and hard, exposed scrambling. (2 hours)

The Rock Climbs

Thearlaich- Dubh (TD) gap. 20 metres. UK grade Severe. (Alpine grade IV/ V)

Reminiscent of many Ogwen valley traditional polished routes. The Gap succumbs most easily to those adopting a fighting approach. An un-nerving "pop" is unavoidable on the crux manoeuvre. Luckily this is no worse when carrying a rucsac.

Take five slings for three thread runners and two spikes, one of which forms a solid belay.

Kings Chimney. 25 metres.
UK grade Difficult. (Alpine grade III/IV)

A beautiful corner climb that finishes across a steep slab, which becomes the crux in wet conditions.

Take 3 slings for threads and good spike belay. A few medium-sized nut runners also protect the route.

Inaccessible Pinnacle, east ridge. 70 metres.
UK grade Moderate. (Alpine grade II/ III)

Only one awkward move but the route is always very intimidating. If pitching the route take care to avoid the rope snagging. Good belay at 30 metres.

There are at least 7 good spike runners.

There are more abseils possible than the one from the fixed chain. Use imagination, cooperation and courtesy to avoid queuing at busy times.

Naismith's Route. 35 metres.
UK grade Severe. (Alpine grade IV/ V)

A serious and exposed route to undertake at a late stage of the Traverse. Good protection is difficult to arrange until after the crux move.

Rope drag and communication is a problem if attempted in one pitch. A good belay can be arranged by traversing 10 metres round from beneath the huge overhang to a large ledge on the south face.

Take slings for 2 thread runners and 3 good spikes. There are a number of medium/ large sized nut placements.

Bypasses

Too many teams have failed as early as the TD Gap when they have become embroiled in queues at this notorious bottleneck. A 3-hour hold-up is not unusual with both leaders and seconds struggling often followed by a frustrating bout of sac hauling. This seriously compromises chances of completing the Traverse.

To bypass the Gap across the top of Coire a' Ghrunnda and traverse Sgurr Alasdair takes only 25 minutes and keeps the crucial flow going. (Saves 1- 3 hours)

Other timesaving bypasses include:

An Garbh Caisteal. You should certainly down climb this on the N. W. corner rather than get into abseiling unnecessarily as many do. Alternatively bypass the Caisteal in under a minute on the Coruisk side (saves 10 or 20 minutes.)

Sgurr Dubh Mor is not on the main Ridge and should only be done if you are moving well and wish to bag all of the Munros. Sgurr Dubh an Da Bheinn is both traditionally and logically the peak to include. (Saves over half an hour.)

Collies Ledge instead of Kings Chimney- one classic route exchanged for another. (Saves up to half an hour.)

Bypass An Stac. Good for giving the brain a rest if not the legs. Not my favourite dodge.

In Pinn. Should not be avoided. Queues should give priority to Ridge parties but only if you are soloing or moving roped together. Ascending the short side or South Crack and then setting up your own abseil is often quickest and least frustrating way around large numbers.



Bidean Druim nan Ramh. Undoubtedly the saviour of many a flagging attempt. A scree/boulder descent on the Glen Brittle side followed by a short rise to Bealach a Harta. (Saves 2 abseils and well over an hour of time.)

Collie's route onto the Bastier Tooth rather than Naismith's. Despite an initial 150m descent Collie's route allows a team to avoid roping up and pitching towards the end of a hard day. Very often my preferred choice. (Saves 25 minutes.)

Descents

Fastest is usually to leave packs at Bealach a Bhashtier. Go up then back down the West Ridge of Gillean before a fairly direct descent to Sligachan. (2.5 hours)

Continuing over and down the Tourist Route is less technical but the way is not easy to find in mist. It also goes away from the hotel/beer to start with. (2.5 hours)

Descending Pinnacle Ridge is class itself. It is possibly even better than in ascent but certainly only for teams still feeling really good. (2.5 hours)

To return to Coruisk descend the Tourist Route then descend between Sgurr Beag and Sgurr nan Uamha to the floor of Glen Sligachan. (3 hours). (Dropping into Harta Coire and crossing the Druim nan Ramh in a more direct line is a painfully frustrating "short-cut.")

From Gars-bheinn a rapid scree run still exists before a long wet section eventually allows the new footpath to be picked up below Coir a' Ghrunnda. (2 hours)

appendix c – the style

The most effective method is to be open-minded right up to the point at which the forecast is good. The list of approaches below is not complete and my opinions on their merits are purely personal. My favourite approach is to walk out to the south end in the evening, bivvy, leave the gear and do the whole ridge lightweight the following day.

The one-day push. Favoured by the soloist there are not many teams competent enough to enjoy this experience. Generally the last few hours become a blur of exposure and dehydration. If you are both competent and exceptionally fit it has a lot to be said for it.

The full-scale bivvy approach. "A good way to ruin the best scrambling in Britain" someone once said. Carrying a huge rucsac makes flowing movement and balance very difficult to maintain. This approach is often needed, however, to get around awkward weather windows. Very often I leave the gear at the bivvy site to get back on schedule for day two.

The lightweight bivvy approach. Only recommended for the balmiest of summer nights when there are very few hours of darkness. Wet weather and long nights often send many teams shivering back to base at dawn.



The pre-stashed bivy approach. This great sounding idea relies on too many factors in all but the best of weather periods. Reaching the gear and recognising where it was stashed are critical to success. Predicting how far along to pre-place the gear is also a gamble.

North to south traverse. Logistically works well as it can all be done from Glen Brittle. Technically more demanding and doesn't flow well with more abseils and rope-work required. Too easy to give up before reaching the "Summit" of Gars Bheinn by bailing out in Coire' a' Ghrunnda

My favourite approach is to walk out to the south end in the evening, bivy, leave the gear and do the whole ridge lightweight the following day.

Most commonly I take a boat in, carry bivy gear for day one, then decide whether to leave the overnight gear or not.

appendix d – what to carry

Equipment List

This equipment list should be reduced greatly if a bivy is not going to be made or if the forecast is very good. Minimise weight by shaving down rock gear (see The Rock Climbs in appendix b.) and very careful calculation of food requirements. Keep the sac compact, with radical removal of emergency clothes and rations. My opinion is that a GPS is close to useless in the Cuillin. Photography should not be a high priority as it wastes valuable time. A good digital camera will weigh nothing and allow quick snaps to be turned into masterpieces at home! Many teams end up with duplication of pen-knives, first aid kits, contact lens solutions etc. All this preparation can be carried out (with a pair of weighing scales) at home.

Worn

- Man made fibres, not cotton.
- Trousers not shorts
- Base layer, light fleece,
- Well broken-in, light to medium weight walking boots
- Good socks
- 30-50-litre rucksack preferably with detachable frame and no side pockets

Carried

- Waterproof jacket and trousers
- Hat and 2 pairs of gloves
- Spare fleece (not as well as bivy gear though!)
- Head torch in good working order. (new batteries, no spares)

Shared

- Route Description
- Harvey's map of the Cuillin
- Compass and whistle
- Small personal first aid kit

Climbing Gear –

Based on steady VS leader standard

Personal

- Harness with a cows tail attached
- Belay plate plus one screw gate,
- prussic loops plus screw gate
- Helmet

Team

- 40 metres of lightweight single rope
- 5 sewn slings (240cm) with krabs
- 3 nuts on rope/dyneema with snap gate
- 3 or 4 wires to cover other sizes
- 3 or 4 extenders with krabs not sewn in
- 1 friend with snap gate
- Abseil tat- 3 @ 3 metres

Additional Equipment for Bivvying

- 2-3-season sleeping bag with man made filling
- Gortex bivy bag
- Sleeping mat long enough to reach head to hip
- Plastic mug
- Penknife and spoon
- Spare underwear and dry socks

Team

- Small gas stove with 2 pans max
- 2 Lighters
- Single Malt Whisky of your choice. I subscribe to the school of sleep benefits outweighing a wee bit of dehydration.



Water

Carry 2 litres maximum at any one time. Fill up as high as possible on approach. Carry capacity to collect extra for the bivy and following day. Tube from camel packs work well as a siphon for collecting from small sources, as do mugs.

Food

A varied supply is needed for 24 hours of effort. There will be quite a lot at the start- good motivation to eat lots on the approach but don't get carried away!

On a 2-day Traverse I will typically consume:

- 6 sandwiches
- 2 packets crisps (salt)
- 20 dried apricots
- 4 chocolate bars
- 6 cereal bars
- 3 Mr K Angel Slices as snacks, "pudding" & breakfast

Overall I aim for a mix of savoury and sweet about 50:50. Treat yourself to lightweight luxuries and don't take just 20 cereal bars.

Main meal

I prefer as much quick-cook pasta as possible with various sauces & meats. One pan used also used as a shared plate.

Brews

A half litre kettle with sealed lid stays clean & boils fast. Tea, coffee and hot water all taste better with the addition of a sugar and whisky!

I aim for a mix of savoury and sweet about 50:50. Treat yourself to lightweight luxuries and don't take just 20 cereal bars.

Pot noodles make suitable bivvy food if they can be fitted in and only require hot water.

High-energy gels and bars are good but need to be supplemented with 'desirable' snacks.

appendix e – time schedule.

This is a reasonable schedule for an experienced team with no previous knowledge of the route but with dry clear conditions. It assumes the carrying of manageable bivvy packs and does not include time spent bivvying. It also gives a good guide to maximum times for any party attempting the challenge in a single day.

Approach. 3 hours

Arrive TD Gap. 5 hours

Arrive In Pinn. 8hours

Arrive An Dorus. 11 hours

Arrive Bealach na Glaic Mor. 12 hours

Bealach a Harta. 13 hours

Bruach na Frithe. 15 hours

Sgurr nan Gilleann. 17 hours

Sligachan hotel. 20 hours

appendix f – weather forecasts

I get every forecast possible (then I choose the best!) and try to make my own interpretation. My schedule ideally takes in all of the following:

Sunday

11-30 Country file or Landward 5 day forecast. BBC.

Daily

07-55 Highland forecast on BBC Radio Scotland- the most reliable for the day by far

18-20 Grampian TV Weather flick to BBC1 national

18-50 Heather Weather. BBC1 Scotland

19-10 Radio Scotland forecast for hill walkers

22-30 latest satellite pictures on BBC1 and Grampian following national news

Long-term forecasts should only be used to plan the ideal build-up to an attempt. It is crucial to weather watch in all but the most settled of periods.

I mainly use the MWIS and Metcheck Internet sites.

If you're not confident in the forecast do something else. A washed out traverse is a horrible, often scary experience.

appendix g – short roping

The black art of moving together on a short rope is the best technique I have ever learnt in climbing. The "one off, all off" vision must be overcome with some lateral thinking and plenty of practise. It is an ancient technique that served the Victorian climbers well on routes that many of us still dream about. Another download will be available soon with details of how to practise and improve your technique.

appendix h – miscellaneous good practices

Choose your dates

Weekend trips are not long enough for most and rarely justify the huge journey to Skye. A week gives you the best chance of a suitable weather window. Mid-summer allows climbing around the clock in good weather so extends the chances of getting a window that lasts long enough.

Research the route

You will need

- Harvey's map of the Cuillin. (1:12,500 enlargement of the Ridge.)
- Route description. Widely available in guidebooks and also on-line.
- Photographs and diagrams of the intricate sections of the Ridge.
- Take note of escape routes, bypasses and water sources.

Fitness

Levels of fitness are hard to quantify but runners tend to have the best gauge of where their fitness lies. A runner capable of completing a marathon in less than 4 hours probably has a good enough level of fitness.

Practicing at home

Moving across a boulder-strewn beach, balancing along kerb stones or a kiddies adventure playground is more suitable training than indoor climbing walls for a Ridge Traverse. Find out what affect a big pack and wet conditions make to your ability.

Pack your ruck sack together and before you leave home. (See appendix d.)

Research the Ridge

The best recipe for success is, undoubtedly, to learn it intimately before making an attempt. Unhindered by a heavy pack a competent aspirant can cover, and learn, most of the Ridge in 2 long days. Good visibility is highly recommended to make recognition of key navigation features easier. It's worth noting that these days are often far more pleasurable than the Traverse itself with less pressure, less gear and no fixed goal.

appendix i

Common Reasons For Failure

- The climbing team
- The weather
- Navigation and research
- Fitness
- Tactical approach
- Rope-work

Treat your choice of partner much as you would for an Alpine route- don't encumber yourself with any combination of unfit, nervous or inexperienced partners. Don't invite all your mates- the lowest common denominator always dictates how slowly the party will move. Two is the ideal number; larger parties exponentially decrease their chances of success.

The weather

Don't get confused by the rumour that you can climb on gabbro in the wet. It may be applicable to the steady controlled movement up a rock climb but not moving at speed on a continuously exposed and narrow ridge for 12 kilometres.

Guidebook times for the Traverse are based on good weather conditions- dry rock and clear visibility. Prior knowledge of the route can get around the problems of navigation but wet rock seriously affects everyone.

As a sweeping generalisation wet rock takes twice as long to move across as dry rock.

The crest of the Ridge does, however, dry almost immediately after rain, which makes a traverse in showery conditions still possible.

Ideally choose to 'go for it' when dry weather is forecast and the tops are clear of cloud. Look for a weather-window of 24 hours or so. Easterly winds tend to be drier than westerlies. (see appendix f.)

Navigation and route finding

Time wasted on route finding is hard to catch up and very draining. There are huge numbers of tempting false lines and the right line is often the least likely looking option. There is no substitute for knowing the route intimately before attempting the full Traverse. This research is not only important but great fun, a factor that is often overlooked in a rush to tick the Ridge.

Fitness

Ascend and descend 4000 metres of mountain in a 24-hour period. This is not a level of physical output that can be just "dredged" up on the spur of the moment and has to be worked on by most people.

Carrying a large Rucsac is bearable on good footpaths but balancing along the narrow crest and climbing steep rocks is a totally different proposition, both hard work and very nerve-wracking.

The mental fatigue created by total concentration for the duration is another factor often underestimated.

Tactical approach

Details of the route and route-choices along the way are well documented. Many put the emphasis on taking the "Purist's" line, often with a tone that is akin to cragging, where success by any other means is considered as inferior or cheating. The reality in mountaineering is that staying alive and using extreme cunning to succeed is both prudent and normal behaviour.

For me the primary objective is to reach "the Summit" of the challenge. If conditions have been treacherous but Gillean is still reached many more difficulties have been overcome than during a Traverse in perfect conditions. The "Summit" is generally accepted as Sgurr nan Gillean (if traversed from south to north) or Gars bheinn (going north to south.)

Rope-work

There are actually only three pitches of roped rock climbing and four abseils involved in following the recommended route from Gars Bheinn to Gillean. Many people resort to abseiling sections that should be down-climbed and pitching on scrambling terrain. Generally this is because of nerves in one or all members of the team.

The correct technique to adopt for such situations is to move roped together which is not a common practise in the UK but is normal in the Alps and Greater Ranges.

Learning this black art should be done in advance not during your attempt.